

Gray, burns, and blake: the transitional poets

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Gray, Burns, and Blake: The Transitional Poets It was the mid-eighteenth century and poets were tiring of the neoclassical ideals of reason and wit. The Neoclassic poets, such as Alexander Pope, "prized order, clarity, economic wording, logic, refinement, and decorum. Theirs was an age of rationalism, wit, and satire." (Guth 1836) This contrasts greatly with the ideal of Romanticism, which was "an artistic revolt against the conventions of the fashionable formal, civilised, and refined Neoclassicism of the eighteenth century." (Guth 1840) Poets like William, "dropped conventional poetic diction and forms in favour of freer forms and bolder language. They preached a return to nature, elevated sincere feeling over dry intellect, and often shared in the revolutionary fervour of the late eighteenth century." (Guth 589) Poets wanted to express emotion again. They wanted to leave the city far behind and travel back to the simple countryside where rustic, humble men and women resided and became their subjects. These poets, William Blake, Thomas Gray, and Robert Burns, caught in the middle of neoclassic writing and the Romantic Age, are fittingly known as the Transitional poets. Thomas Gray transitioned these phases nicely; he kept "what he believed was good in the old, neoclassic tradition" ("Adventures" 442) but ventured forth into "unfamiliar areas in poetry." In particular, Gray brought back to life the use of the first-person singular, for example "One morn I missed him on the customed hill..." ("Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard", p. 433, line 109) which had been "considered a barbarism by eighteenth century norm." (431) Thomas Gray's poem *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard* is a wonderful example of natural settings in transitional poetry. It "reflects on the lives of common, unknown, rustic men and

women, in terms of both what their lives were and what they might have been". (" English" 268) Gray is unafraid to see the poor, and emotionally illustrates how death affects their life: " For them no more the blazing hearth shall burn, / Or busy housewife ply her evening care: / No children run to lisp their sire's return...." However, humble settings were also readily used by Robert Burns, a Scottish poet " frequently counted wholly as a romantic poet" (" English" 281), but who's work often makes him a more transitional as it incorporates both neoclassical and romantic verse ideals. *To a Mouse*, also takes place in the country, and this time the humble subject is not a man, but a lowly mouse. Using such terms as " beastie" and " Mousie" results in an affectionate tone, as the human species is emotionally weighed up against " Mousie's" life. A common ground is found when the poet notes that " the best laid scheme o' mice an' men/ Gang aft agley, / An' lea'e us nought but grief an' pain". This public display of emotion, such as the affection and concern for the mouse, as well as a depressing revelation that life can go wrong for all, would have been surprising to pre-romanticism readers. One of Burns most significant influences though, was his use of Scottish dialect to write his poems; it was " a great departure from the elegant and artificial diction of eighteenth-century poetry." (" Adventures" 441) His use of dialect gave the reader a sense of connection to the common man and the humble subjects of this poetry. It created a rawer, more real mood that would have been lost in the ornamental heroic couplets used by the Neoclassic writers. William Blake is, however, arguably the most important transitional poet. As a poet he did away with the common standards of " rationality and restraint" (Guth 589), instead favouring to

write using " bold, unusual symbols to elaborate the divine energies at work in the universe" in poems such as *The Tyger*. This poem makes use of an awe-inspiring mood, coupled with deeply universal concerns and experiences. In this case, the tiger is a symbol of the evil in mankind, and the heavy knowledge of experience that is brought with adulthood. His poems also made great use of repetition and parallelism, sometimes to gain the effect of a nursery rhyme, simple soft and sweet, as read in *The Lamb*: " Little Lamb God bless thee, / Little Lamb God bless thee." However, the same device also emphasises the rhetorical nature of his famous question " Tyger...what immortal hand or eye, / Could frame thy fearful symmetry?" which makes up both the first and last stanza of *The Tyger*. The transitional poets were no longer afraid to feel and were brave men who put their hearts on paper for all to see. They expressed a simple affection for uncomplicated country life, and used such settings to make profound comments on mankind in general, death, and religion. These poets idealised the humble man, the country setting, and universal truths. It is fitting to call Gray, Burns and Blake adventurers, whose guides to new lands were their pens. They dared change through the use of unconventional devices, such as dialect, the invocation of emotions, and the egotistic use of the first person singular. These changes in verse, and the subsequent popularity, and admiration received from the public, for Gray and Burns (Blake was not appreciated until the next century) and their transitional poetry marked the beginning of the end of Neoclassicism. Now, these three poets having forged the way, it was time for the Romantics to follow. Works Cited *Adventures in English Literature*, New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1996 *English Literature 12: The*

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